

Retirement Ceremony Remarks

Captain John Allen Williams, USNR (Ret.)

Naval Training Center Great Lakes
25 September 1999

Admiral Hunter, distinguished Flag officers, my family, shipmates, colleagues and friends:

Karen and I are very grateful for the many courtesies extended to us by Admiral Hunter and his staff. REDCOM 13 and the Naval Reserve Center Great Lakes also did much to make this day a success. In particular, my associate, LT Heidi Lenzini, did an outstanding job in arranging the details of this ceremony. Please join me in thanking them, and let us also express our gratitude to the Great Lakes Navy Band and the Naval Reserve Center Great Lakes Color Guard for their outstanding performances here this afternoon....

There is no way I can express all that is in my heart today, or to thank all those who deserve to be recognized. I think you know who you are. When I asked several people what I should speak about, they all said, "about ten minutes." This is good advice. If you want to know in more detail what I think about the issues facing the military, read my articles, buy my forthcoming book, or invite me back for a dining in. This is an occasion for more personal things. You may start timing now.

When I was commissioned, the Navy was much larger, but riddled with problems. More than one aircraft carrier experienced race riots, and there were places below decks that khaki dared not go. Discipline was often a joke: male Naval Reserve sailors could wear short hair wigs to cover their pony tails. Many reserve units had no specific wartime mission and did nothing for peacetime support. For many in the active force, the Naval Reserve was a parasite grafted onto the Navy by Congress.

The United States had already suffered thousands of casualties in a war we would eventually lose in the court of public opinion. Before it was over, many thousands more would fall prematurely into the arms of God. Even by then it was too late for my church school classmate, Army Second Lieutenant Bob Hibbs, who left behind a record of heroism and the Medal of Honor. Even in peacetime, there are casualties, such as Karen's and my friend Navy Lieutenant Hal Gwynn, who survived two tours and a Purple Heart in Vietnam as a helicopter pilot, only to lose his life in a 1973 crash in Newport harbor. I know that many of you here can think of many more examples than I can. Thinking about their sacrifices has kept me properly humble in evaluating my own contribution to the common good.

Many things have improved. We tackled racial issues head on and confronted the problems of drug abuse and gender discrimination. "One Navy" is no longer a slogan, it is a reality. Many Navy functions are now performed only by Naval Reservists, and as budgets become tighter we will do even more.

The active duty and reserve people gathered here today, from enlisted to Flag Officer, are the ones who turned this situation around. For the "career reservists" here, it is not just a series of part time jobs. It is the opportunity to work together with people we deeply admire, and to make what contribution we can to our Navy and our country in company with them and with our fellow reservists. We are honored to be a part of this life, even as we recognize the far greater commitment of our shipmates who have chosen the Navy as their primary career.

Admiral Hunter's remarks were very generous, and I appreciate them more than I would like to admit. Still, I have no doubt that the Navy will carry on quite well without my direct participation. After all, when you take your hand out of a bucket of water, the hole does not long remain. It is also good to put things into perspective. I could combine Navy life with my career at a great Jesuit university. College professors, like airline pilots, have the flexibility needed to manage the time demanded by the Navy. Also, the military is the focus of my scholarly efforts. In fact, I am hard pressed to think of any great sacrifices that the Navy has asked of me. True, I spent too much time away from my family, but I did not have to endure the series of family separations that are routine for the active forces. I would be further along in my civilian profession if I had focused on purely academic pursuits, but this is not unique to me; it is

shared by every other citizen soldier.

I hope that something will endure besides thirty years of wonderful memories, some great mementos on my "I love me" wall, and an eventual retirement check. I fancy that at one time I was a fair operator, but I also remember George Carlin's remark that "the older you get, the better you realize you were." At heart I am a teacher and a strategist. In my two professions I was able to make a contribution to Navy strategy. As an academician I will attempt a greater one to military professionalism and civil-military relations. I like to think that my best Navy contribution is to its people -- including, I hope, to some here today. It would please me greatly if I had even a small hand in your success, including two of my students (so far) who have been recognized by their country with their own flag. I am immeasurably proud of all of you.

Many here today have contributed far more to the Navy than I have. But the most remarkable thing is not what we may have achieved. It is that all of us here today who wear or have worn the uniform of our country are an endangered species. We know from first hand experience how the military works and what it can -- and cannot -- accomplish. Unfortunately, this is becoming less and less common in the ranks of our country's elites, whether political, media, educational, or business. The reserve forces fill some of this need, and provide a vital link between the active duty forces and civilian society.

Those who have chosen the profession of arms, even as a corollary to a full time career elsewhere, are bound together for all time. Not by a common race. Not by a common gender. Not by a common denomination. Not by other characteristics of esthetic, sexual, or religious preference. We are joined by our core values. They are expressed in different ways by the different services, but they are essentially the same. For the Army, "duty, honor, country;" for the Air Force, "integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do;" for the Coast Guard, "honor, respect, and devotion to duty;" and for the Navy and Marine Corps, "honor, courage, and commitment." I will spare you my poor imitation of Douglas MacArthur in telling you what these words mean, but the thought behind all of the codes is the same: dedicated and honorable service in defense of the democratic state.

I have found much to admire in all with whom I have served. Not all officers have been so fortunate. After the Duke of Wellington reviewed his troops for the first time, he said, "I do not know what effect they will have on the enemy, but by God, they terrify me." I have been particularly fortunate in my academic and military mentors. I will note only three of these, all present today:

-- Professor Sam C. Sarkesian, retired Army Lieutenant Colonel of Infantry (10th Special Forces and 11th Airborne). Sam hired me at Loyola University Chicago farther back than either of us would care to remember, gave me my start in military studies, and serves as a constant inspiration as a scholar, teacher, mentor, officer, and friend. He is the epitome of "an officer and a gentleman," and I owe him my whole career.

-- Professor Charles Moskos, America's preeminent military sociologist. Charlie is a former draftee and the world's most perceptive commentator on the role of the military in a free society. He combines rigorous academic standards with practical policy advice and a human touch. More than anyone I can think of, he "speaks truth to power," and "power" listens. When I grow up, I want to be Charlie.

-- Rear Admiral Frank Harness (in about five minutes, "Frank") known to many of us here as a friend and mentor. Working with then-Captain Harness was never dull, especially on those days when he took my advice to "be a net exporter of stress." Like countless others, I benefitted professionally from his patronage and personally from his friendship. I never met a finer officer.

My most important comments this afternoon are for the most important people in my life, my family. You all may listen in:

-- To my late grandmother, Grace Chilton Kingman, and my late mother, Lieutenant (junior grade) Mary Kingman Williams, U.S. Navy Nurse Corps -- who served in Australia during the Second World War and was a "shellback" who crossed the Equator. These extraordinary women raised me to trust in God and to respect everyone with whom I associate, whatever their station. They would both have been very happy if I had made the Navy my full-time career. I

had the loving support of a large family of beloved aunts, uncles, and cousins. We were never wealthy in material things, but were rich beyond imagination in the things that count most. My mother'sister, my Aunt Helen Lett, here today from St. Louis, will testify to all of these things.

-- To Karen's parents, Russell and Donna Lauterbach. These kind and thoughtful people lured me into their family with their beautiful daughter, and have treated me like a son ever since. It is both a privilege and a pleasure to be a part of your family, and I thank you.

-- To our beautiful and talented daughters, Ani and Emmy, who have been a constant source of joy, pride, and inspiration to their mother and me. My most important legacy to the world, one that I share with your mother, is not the Navy and not my scholarly efforts; it is you. You believe in me more than any father has a right to expect, and I have been a far better officer trying to become the person you believe I already am. Please don't stop now; I have a way to go yet.

-- Most of all, to my wonderful wife and best friend, Karen, the source of my greatest happiness: our children and our continuing life together. I can never adequately express how much your love, support, and wise counsel mean to me, but you know. You say you don't believe it, but I thought about marriage the moment I laid eyes on you, on a day that seems like yesterday. As the young people here will discover, if you find the right person to share their life with you, your life will be fulfilled. May you be as fortunate as I have been.

One final thought: We weave the fabric of our lives slowly and draw from many strands: most importantly of family, but also of friends, of experiences, of accomplishments, of disappointments, of hopes for the future, of shared and personal memory. Some of the men and women whose respect I most cherish have woven their lives with threads of Army green, of Air Force light blue, of Marine Corps red, and of Navy blue. If you take the Navy seriously, you become a part of it and the Navy becomes part of you. I did so without reservation, and the threads of blue and gold in my own life are indelible.

I did not expect to like the Navy so much. I joined under some duress at a time in which others saw their responsibilities differently. I have received far more from the Navy than I could ever put into it. I am a better, happier, and healthier man because of my service. This transition occurs with a measure of surprise at the rapid passing of the years, but without regrets or second thoughts. I did my duty and am as proud of my Navy service as anything in my life aside from my family.

Thank you all for coming and sharing this day with us.